

Bishop's New Mexico Legislative Luncheon
Reflections for Legislative Representatives and Faith Leaders
06 February 2018

Dear friends from the faith communities of New Mexico, respected legislators, staff members and all who serve the people of this wonderful state: it's my pleasure to be with you again this year on behalf of Lutheran Advocacy Ministry here in New Mexico. Thank you for taking the time to be with us, and thank you for your work on behalf of all the people of New Mexico. Your service is deeply appreciated.

Usually when I'm preparing to address you, I'm asking myself the day before, "What should I talk about? What might make a difference to these gathered folks?" Not so this year. I've actually known what I want to share with you since November 17 at about 10 AM in the morning as I sat in St Paul's Lutheran Church in Albuquerque. I was attending the Lutheran Advocacy Ministry New Mexico Advocacy Conference, and Ruth Hoffman has just introduced Pastor Amy Reumann, the Director for Advocacy for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Pastor Reumann was reflecting on why Lutherans in particular have faith advocacy in our DNA, something I addressed at this luncheon last year. She quoted Martin Luther's call to speak boldly, publicly, and honestly to seek the common good.

She quoted Luther's writing on the Magnificat, dating to 1521, where he reminded both the faithful and those called to govern that the role of government is to see that the needs of all citizens are met, and when the government is failing in that duty, it's the proper role of the church to call the government to account as part of our calling to seek our neighbor's well-being.

She recalled our own baptismal liturgy, a liturgy shared with many other churches, that calls upon on us, as people held in the promises of God, to strive for justice and peace in all the earth.

And then she said something that really struck home, not just for those of us who happen to be in the Lutheran part of the Body of Christ but for all of us in the Christian faith community. "Advocacy is an undeveloped muscle in the Christian life – a life in which we are called to be Christ to our neighbor." Advocacy is an undeveloped muscle in the Christian life. I suspect Christians are not unique here; advocacy is likely an undeveloped muscle for most people of faith, regardless of their particular religious tradition.

There is a reluctance for us as people of faith to step into the arena of advocacy, for lots of reasons. And yet once we do, it proves transformational.

Our theme for the ELCA Rocky Mountain Synod this year is: Be Transformed. And when I was sitting at St Paul's back on November 17, I began to wonder about the relationship between advocacy and transformation. What happens when this underutilized muscle gets exercised? What really changes? What is the actual impact of our advocacy ministry? Does it actually have an impact?

I recalled at that moment what Ruth herself has often said about advocacy – it's redwood farming. You have to expect to be at it a long time to see the fruits of your labors! Is a slow-burn transformation.

And yet, what I came to realize in that moment is that the external transformation of our world into a more just society is only one of the transformational aspects of advocacy. Perhaps the more important transformation is what advocacy does to us as people of faith when we engage in speaking up on behalf of our neighbors for the good of all God's beloved people.

Turns out that the transformational power of advocacy isn't found in the outcome alone – it's also found within the process itself, in what happens to US as we engage. In that sense, advocacy is indeed a faith practice, a muscle we need to exercise for the sake of our own growth as people of faith.

I want to offer to you eight different ways that we are transformed when advocacy becomes a regularly exercised part of our lives of faith. These are all interrelated and in no particular order, but I hope you'll begin to see the pattern.

1. In a culture of individualism, advocacy transforms us as people of faith from **isolation to interconnectedness**. As individuals and as communities of faith, we tend to operate in isolation. Oh, we may see the world out there and even understanding some of the critical problems being faced. But when it is so easy to say, "Not my issue" we can then dismiss our inherent connectivity to the struggles being faced by our neighbors. Advocacy moves us from a place of "not my issue" to a place where we recognize that my well-being and my neighbor's well-being cannot be understood apart from one another. We are inherently interconnected.
2. In a culture that promotes the understanding that everyone is responsible for their own life situation, advocacy transforms us from **single problem diagnosticians to systems analysts**. As people of faith we often still buy into the notion that someone's difficulties are a product of their own making – that if they just made different choices they would have a different outcome. As we engage in advocacy, we begin to recognize the complex systems at work that keep certain of our neighbors locked into a prison of poverty or marginalization or oppression having nothing to do with their individual choices. And that's when we begin to ask about the systems at work, and our own role in them.

3. Advocacy transforms our posture as people of faith from one of **blame to one of shared responsibility**. Once we begin to recognize the impact of overlaying systems and historical patterns at work in creating injustice in our midst, we can't simply point a finger and blame others; rather, we begin to recognize our own culpability as individuals and as faith communities in perpetuating the very systems that oppress our neighbors. And that creates a certain humility within us that hopefully tempers our tendency towards self-righteousness, thinking that the issues are simple and the answers easy. We know we're getting closer to being truly transformed when our advocacy forces us to confront the question: What am I willing to give up that my neighbor may flourish?
4. Advocacy transforms us as people of faith from **charity distributors to participants in God's unfolding justice**. I want to be clear that there's a time and place for charity. When my neighbor is cold, I don't begin with a discussion about the systemic issues that have led to them into a situation of being cold – I do whatever is in my power to be sure my neighbor is warm. But if I stop at charity, as many individuals and communities of faith tend to do, I miss the larger picture and the opportunity to see my role in God's unfolding work of justice and reconciliation in this world. My church likes to talk about "God's Work, Our Hands" – and it's true. But God's work does not end at simple charity – it is the work of justice, of reconciling all things, of assuring life and life abundant for all creation.
5. Another transformational impact of advocacy is to move us from a place of **individual impotence to collective impact**. Look around you today and you see what I mean. Seeking change in our world for the well-being of all God's people is a daunting task, and when we feel like we are the only ones working for a better world, it can feel hopeless. But advocacy is inherently relational and invites us into a larger community of possibility. There is power in knowing that I have a role to play and yet it doesn't depend only on me. We are better together, and spending time in advocacy with one another brings that truth to light.
6. Because advocacy is inherently relational, it has the power to transform us from **people who seek to do FOR others to people who walk WITH others**. If we wish to speak on behalf of neighbors who are struggling, yet we never actually meet those neighbors, or listen to their stories and support them in speaking their own truth, we have missed the point of the whole endeavor. Anything we might have to say about the needs of my neighbor only becomes credible when I have been transformed by my journey with that neighbor.
7. Advocacy transforms us as people of faith by **challenging our own dualistic thinking and teaching us to love our opponents**. I credit Richard Rohr with equipping me with the language of dualistic thinking – this inherent tendency we

have to divide everything in our minds into this/that, right/wrong, with me/against me, good/bad. The Divine Mind does not operate that way, but recognizes the paradox that each of us are at once sinner and saint, filled with both ignorance and insight, inherently connected to one another despite whatever differences might divide us. When we engage in advocacy, we are in relationship not only with those whose struggles we seek to represent, but with those who have diametrically opposing views of the situation or the solution. And we are called to love them, too – to see them in fullness of their identity as fellow children of God, and to engage in our debate and arguments without demonizing those with whom I disagree. Mind you, I didn't say transformation was easy or painless!

8. Finally, advocacy transforms us as people of faith by inviting us to actually **trust the God who calls us into this ministry** in the first place. When we look at the long arc of history we see many times when the impact of those seeking God's justice was only realized in the next generation. The outcome of our work is not in our hands and yet our participation in what God is seeking creates outcomes we can never imagine. I can't help but think of Ruth when I think of this call to trust that God is at work despite any evidence to the contrary. I know Ruth's participation in this ministry of advocacy has changed countless lives – whether she knows it or not. Some of those lives are here in New Mexico and have been transformed directly as the result of policies that were changed or implemented because of the efforts made by Ruth and her colleagues. But the transformation ripple is so much bigger than that. I know I have been transformed by my relationship with Ruth, that I see the world differently now than I did before I met Ruth – and I know I'm not alone. I believe that such transformation is part of the new future that God is continually bringing about, whether we see or not. To trust that allows us to live with both gratitude and hope.

I close with these words from the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 12: ***Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.***

As you and I work for the sort of world that God desires for all creation, do not doubt that you and I are being transformed by our engagement in this faith practice of advocacy, renewed in our own minds – and hearts and being – as God's will for what is good and acceptable and perfect is done in and through us.

To that we can say, "Thanks be to God".

Thank you!